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ABSTRACT

This paper first addresses assumptions about teaching and scholarly research, drawing from feminist theory in communication and women's studies. Second, the paper discusses one scholar's commitments as ethnographer and teacher to students, research participants, colleagues and others, including ways to enact those commitments in the classroom and the field. The paper then explores conflicts in the classes where resistance to feminist research and teaching abounds, and those encountered in the research process. The paper ends with an invitation for feminist scholars to continue discussions about their lives. (Contains 46 references.)
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COMMITMENTS AND CONFLICTS OF A FEMINIST ETHNOGRAPHER AND TEACHER: TO CULTIVATE A DIALOGUE

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Commitments and Conflicts of a Feminist Ethnographer and Teacher: To Cultivate a Dialogue

Summary

This paper first addresses assumptions about teaching and scholarly research, drawing from feminist theory in communication and women's studies. Second, I explore some commitments as ethnographer and teacher to students, research participants, colleagues and others, including ways to enact those commitments in the classroom and the field. Then, I discuss conflicts in classes where resistance to feminist research and teaching abounds, and those encountered in the research process. I end with an invitation to continue discussions about our lives as feminist scholars.

Commitments and Conflicts Of A Feminist Ethnographer and Teacher: To Cultivate a Dialogue

In this paper, I address commitments and conflicts encountered in the process of teaching communication and women's studies and simultaneously working as a feminist ethnographer. I teach small group process, a senior seminar called Communication Power and Violence (an interdisciplinary course, cross-listed with women's studies), and the basic course in women's studies. I begin with some basic assumptions and then discuss commitments and conflicts encountered in the process of doing both ethnographic work and teaching with university students and colleagues.

I am working on a project entitled "Black and White Women Friends: Claiming the Margins," involves eighteen working and middle class women who have created and sustained long-term, cross-race friendships with varied levels of intimacy. The purpose of the study is to describe in detail ways in which black and white women from socially marked groups come to form and sustain intimate and voluntary friendships over years of time. I use long interviews, extended contact with participants following interviews, and repeated presentation of transcribed interviews and reports to which participants have responded. I also use historical, literary and fine and performing arts resources written by

and about black and white women in U.S. culture. I look for ways in participants confront varied forms of oppression within their friendships and within their kin and social networks. Tracing strategies they develop to confront and to creatively survive the damage of prejudice and discrimination, I work toward identifying useful themes about such relationships. The project includes pairs of Mennonite, feminist and social movement/organization unaffiliated black and white friends whose relationships average over ten years in duration.

Assumptions

First, these are some assumptions about my work as a teacher and ethnographer. Ethnographer Mary Louise Pratt states, the researcher is "not a monolithic scientist-observer, but a multifaceted entity who participates, observes, and writes from multiple, constantly shifting positions" (Pratt, 1986). As such, I find myself growing with the project and notice the growth of participants as well. For example, in interviewing some of the Mennonite women in the working class group, I record my own changing perceptions of these individuals; simultaneously, they respond in follow up interviews with questions about their own beliefs and practices being "possibly feminist!" In studying the transcripts, I find the interplay of everyday life and research process inextricably related such that the positions from which we as researcher and participant speak

must be seen and heard in context. I find Pratt's assumption most important in conducting the interviews and follow-up contacts and in analyzing the data.

Second, feminism means a commitment to social change relating to all oppressions encountered by people in a culture: sexism, racism, classism, and so on (Hooks, 1985). The roles I play as researcher and teacher pertain to social change on a variety of levels (interpersonal and macro political) and within a variety of socially marked groups. I assume that the address of one form of oppression, such as racism in this study, necessitates accounting for the other forms which subtly and vividly color the lives of those with whom I study. For example, it is not enough to ask what is different about people as friends, based on race. There is race, and then class which holds different meanings in different races, and issues of sexuality, age, regional origin, religious background, where one lives now, how one dresses, eats, and earns a living (Langston, 1988). In using extended interviews with open-ended questions, I have been able to explore the webs of oppressions in which these and other friendships are situated.

Third, I assume, as a white woman that I am both painfully aware and totally oblivious to the history of slavery in United States culture (McIntosh, 1988). Like many feminists, my commitment to work for social and internal change involves a life-long process, reflected in and also feeding my practice as ethnographer and teacher. As Peggy

McIntosh eloquently draws our attention to the "invisible knapsack of unearned privileges and protections" we as whites carry with us by virtue of our skin color and race, we may use her sensitizing awareness to teach, research and live in a different way.

Fourth, I understand living and working with ambivalence as a teacher and scholar is absolutely necessary to gaining an understanding of oneself and the cultures we study. There are truths to understand, not Truth.

I am both cautious and bold in establishing my relationships with research participants and students (Langness & Frank, 1981). I form friendships, but ones of "a peculiar sort" as Michael Agar prescribes in the process of teaching and learning (Agar, 1980). As a white, nontraditional woman, feminist and middle-class person with race and class privilege, I can travel easily in diverse circles and meet up with impassable barriers as well. Appreciating and expecting such ambiguity is part of the teaching and learning process for me, a given. What is important about this assumption is this: as a teacher, I can model an appreciation for the difficult and confusing ambiguities and not attempt to provide pat answers to students' questions or dilemmas; for example, I can help them to learn the importance of situating their observations in cultural contexts and challenging general theories based on studies limited to one race, gender, ethnic group, or region of the country. As an ethnographer, I expect ambiguity and

use it as a way to make my analyses and writing relevant to different contexts within a case study and different kinds of friendships within the whole group of women with whom I worked. An interesting example of this assumption coming into play is found in the case of the oldest women in the study (ages 70 and 80). Theirs was a friendship which some would describe as less intimate based on criteria for friendship and closeness: frequency of contact, topics discussed, reciprocal exchange of favors and things, confidences shared and held. The oldest participant herself questioned whether I as a researcher might disqualify her relationship as a friendship for these reasons. However, as we proceeded to explore this relationship through the research process, both partners concluded that this was a long standing and significant friendship which was unusual in that the commonly held assumptions about such relationships were not operative and never had been for them. Thus, one must consider the importance and strength of weak ties as Malcolm Parks and Peggy Wireman suggest (Parks, 1982; Wireman, 1978)!

Finally, I assume that women can and do constitute agency; that we are able to and do criticize, reject and reshape ideology as survivors of most and often multiple forms of oppression. Thus, for example, as a feminist ethnographer, I do not characterize participants as victims, caught in a web of oppressions with no exit. Rather, I view them as survivors in a system which requires multiple and

creative forms of resistance. I work to preserve and present in their most unedited form the voices of the participants as well as the mediations between us as they occurred in the gathering and analysis of data. That is, I work toward the representation of my own and their realities as socially constructed and fluid. Thus, the text created is collaborative albeit ultimately prepared and edited at the computer alone, by me.

Commitments

What then are some commitments I hold as an ethnographer and teacher? Some commitments include those to my families of origin and choice, students, colleagues and research participants. One is to process self-consciously the effects of my childhood on my relationships in the present. It is not enough for me to ask participants about their childhoods and families of origin to gain an understanding of the themes as they emerge or to frame important communication issues in class. What I bring to the research interviews is also data, self-consciously applied to the analyses and to the process of the interviews themselves. For example, in discussing foster care with a participant who spent many childhood years in the child welfare system, I reflected on my own experiences and mentioned them to her as we proceeded. As we explored her friendship history and the issues she found important in forming and maintaining close relationships, there were times when I thought I understood precisely

because of shared experiences and perceptions. The commitment to work toward a self-reflexive analysis and text lead us to discuss these perceptions and how they affected us throughout our lives, to see where we were similar and where we were different as white, urban women in the same age group.

A second commitment is to understand how such effects carry over into the classroom, the field and to my research and writing. For example, I ask each participant how their early experiences of observing women's friendships influenced their own relationships later in life. In doing this, I too noted my own responses to this question. I noted the isolation my mother endured as very different from what some participants described; I came to understand more about my own background as I listened to their stories and why I value friendships as highly as I do.

A third commitment is to understand and grow beyond limiting patterns established for survival as a child and to integrate that growth into other aspects of my life. As a teacher of communication and women's studies, I teach about family or domestic (privatized) violence. I never teach about conflict management, an integral part of our discipline, without integrating the literature on violence into course content. As an ethnographer, I encourage women to discuss ways they survived, not as pathologies but as patterns developed over time that allowed for them to mature, hold jobs and often, rear children -- to live as adults.

In doing this, they could readily comment on patterns of behavior that were both problematic and constructive, saying things like, I know I am this way because of how I grew up. I know it (being cautious of who one selects to confide in, being very strict about negotiating reciprocity in relationships, restricting leisure time in lieu of doing substantial amounts of political organizing) has to do with me wanting to be different from my family, wanting more out of life, wanting not to be stepped on, isolated. I encouraged such reflections and actively engaged in similar ones of my own as we proceeded.

Another set of commitments revolves around women and men who are profeminist and working for social change. I work to support and contribute to other's work in ways that enhance and build community. As a teacher, I encourage research projects which sensitize students to social issues and which give them opportunities to observe first hand the implications of social change through working with profeminist men as well as women in field projects and in the course of interviewing for their own research. As an ethnographer, I specifically chose Claiming the Margins, and others, to integrate my own priorities with other's working for change. For example, when the Mennonite congregation I was working with was planning to participate in an anti-Ku Klux Klan rally, I delivered flyers for them. I advertised the rally at the university and encouraged students to attend. More than once, I would meet participants at

community functions, political events, and cultural programs where our intellectual, cultural and political interests and commitments overlapped. Second, I have shared the work accomplished on this and other projects with other groups working for change: multicultural community groups in Philadelphia, caucuses and organizations within academic conferences and associations. From them, I have gained additional insights and I have given back some of my own work.

There are commitments to work with conflict, interpersonal and organizational in ways that allow for the continuation of projects and change, even when doing this involves confusion and hurt, so well described by Bernice Reagon in her essay on coalition politics (Reagon, 1983). Lynette Uttal states that doing cross cultural work requires white women to listen to and build on the ideas of women of color (Uttal, 1990). This dual activity requires mediation and at times, extended work between and within groups to achieve consensus. I have participated as mediator, and as member in such situations. As a teacher, I teach conflict management within a multi-cultural context, and include information on power and its influence on conflict. I use role plays, poetry, videos, and rap music to teach about conflict and to explore with students ways to work nonviolently with it. I assume that conflict will be a part of the process of doing feminist research and teaching, not something that can be put to rest with tact, professional

distance, denial or "good will." For me, to work with, not avoid conflict is another departure from early learning, an example of a commitment which represents a departure from previously learned patterns.

Finally, I am committed to work to understand differences in perspective within and across varied socially marked groups. To see to it that perspectives that might otherwise receive "nods that silence" are used in discussion that foster thinking, activity and change (Uttal, 1990). As a teacher, this means using materials by and about women of color, people different from myself and most of my students. As an ethnographer, this means immersing myself in the cultures of peoples who I study not just to gather data in the formal sense, but to work toward that peculiar relationship described by Michael Agar: to work toward deeply understanding the emic as one from the outside (Agar, 1980).

To those who resist feminist work I am committed to finding common ground on which to build coalitions, to recognizing and respecting what is decent and good about people who resist feminist work; to allowing for and cultivating the possibility of change over time. I am also committed to demanding respect and resisting abuse by those who chose destructive or oppressive postures.

To participants in my research, I work to collaborate on the negotiation of meaning, both within the interview process and in the writing of the text. I do this by sharing written materials including transcripts of interviews and analyses

with participants and asking for their responses, allowing time for follow-up interviews and phone conversations, inviting participants to presentation of my work in the community and on university campuses, staying in touch over the years, recording changes in their lives and their perspectives.

I work to represent participants' words and meanings by placing their words in a context that has as much depth as possible: by accounting for their multiple roles as political leaders, private persons with intimate relationships, workers, parents, friends, and women situated in their respective races, classes, ethnic groups, and spiritual lives within which there is much diversity. I try to avoid essentializing women as members of one or more groups, thereby privileging the mythical norm (Lorde, 1984; Spelman, 1988). I immerse myself in the esthetics and politics of their cultures through the use of such resources as novels, essays, the fine and performing arts, political events and organizations. A priority in this work involves giving back something of use to the participants and the communities from which they come: reports, books, new opportunities for people to work together, my time and resources. These are the conscious commitments I make and work toward as a teacher and ethnographer.

Conflicts

I present seven conflicts which revolve around aspects of doing feminist ethnography and teaching. First, in doing ethnography, the conflict of writing for different audiences with different agendas is ever present. Bridging the gaps between research methodologies, political orientations, and disciplinary boundaries make writing into a process of diplomacy, translation, and at times creative combinations of materials to make a point. For example, I use poetry and essays with the use of case materials in part to create a bridge for common or enhanced understanding.

Another conflict revolves around how to represent women in bibliographies and texts. I include authors' first names in my texts and reference list entries, but do not fully identify all non-Anglo and women writers in either. This dilemma, representing the identities of scholars is one not easily accomplished within traditional disciplines where the anominity of the writer is believed to enhance objectivity. Thus, new ways of dealing with the conflicting views about representation are still emerging and present challenges for feminist ethnographers (Bohan, 1990; Richardson, 1990).

As a professor, teaching ethnographic methods in a discipline that privileges experimental research and in a department that does not have a course in qualitative methods poses conflicts for me and for students. Although I experience some support within my own department for teaching

ethnographic methods, the fact remains that such methodologies are marginalized within the larger discipline.

Another research and teaching related conflict pertains to participants' stories of childhood abuse that were at times difficult to for me hear, especially in the first round of interviews. I found myself more distant from students as I worked on integrating this material with my own life experiences. I did not know how to speak or write about this at first. When participant stories resonated loudly, I needed time and space to process this material once the interview were over and as I was transcribing these tragic stories. Deadlines and other common duties often made this very difficult. From doing ethnography, I learned about myself as much as about the women with whom I studied. This learning eventually became an invaluable feature of my teaching; however, while I was in the process of conducting the interviews and beginning analyses, there were times when intense contact with students, especially those who were bringing difficult problems of their own to my attention for help, was very difficult.

As a feminist ethnographer, helping students to gain a voice and teaching them to give voice to those with whom they study is a two-fold dilemma. In most university settings, students are to be seen and heard only in a very limited context. No one know that better than the students. Further, their understanding of feminist scholarship and theory is most often limited. Thus, many of my assumptions

and practices seem foreign if not threatening. At times, students gain a voice through my own modeling of these assumptions. But, this process is not fostered in academe and it requires time to be effective. Some resist claiming agency, preferring the teacher to "be in charge" in a very traditional sense. Likewise, some participants look to the researcher as having the correct answers to their own questions! Some wish for more of a voice, but cannot achieve what they see as potentially desirable in one semester or interview. For others, the idea of breaking the alienation from learning and engaging in developing voice is exhilarating. To have different students with very diverse sentiments about this kind of learning in the classroom is always conflictual. To see ethnographic participants test out their own authority on varied levels also lends itself to the old problem of getting "good" (perceptive, informed, insightful and articulate) informants and ones who offer less out of a sense of inferiority or protectiveness.

Part of this conflict can be seen in the difficulty with teaching students to listen to and come to understand each other as research colleagues or learners. This view of each other as potential sources of information and analysis is highly conflictual when they attribute all authority to the teacher and/or the textbook. I cultivate collaboration and student research teams, but see the resistance to this kind of work as systemically based. This conflict can take many forms throughout the course of a semester; for me, the

challenge is to identify the underlying themes of relative voicelessness early and to accept people at different phases of their lives with different learning priorities and styles, to cultivate the potential for change.

One way I work with conflict over student agency is to encourage race, class and gender analyses in all courses, not just in women's studies courses, first by using examination of the self as writer and learner in the closest to home sense. Many students come to appreciate and feel affirmed by reflexivity, once understood and engaged in it. Then, learning the importance of race, class and gender analyses are often more readily accepted. I work toward integrating the cultivation of student voice with the cultivation of political awareness and a sense of responsibility to act on one's knowledge, not just reproduce it on tests.

A final area of conflict is reflected in the multiple roles of teacher, ethnographer, feminist, and "friend of a peculiar sort" (Agar, 1980). People play multiple roles in life and most encounter conflicts within the combinations for a variety of reasons. In those roles cited above, I do the following to work within the conflicts that emerge. First, I use interactive student journaling as part of the learning process. Students write, I respond in the journals and then read excerpts anonymously in class with students' permission. Students then use the journal excerpts as a springboard for class discussion and record their responses in new journal entries). I teach and model self-reflexivity in writing and

thinking. I encourage the negotiation of student conflicts within the classroom, cultivating understanding and working with difference as a means of internal and social change so well described by Audre Lorde when she advises, "Do not let differences pull you apart. Use then - that is empowerment" (Lorde, 1990, p. 11).

I attempt to demystify research and to relate it to students' lives as work that is useful and creative. I work toward racial, gender, ethnic and other forms of inclusivity in my classes and course materials. I relate my own research work, including dilemmas like those outlined above with students as teaching examples. And, I set limits on my time and teach students to respect those limits as necessary and good. This aspect of limit setting is especially important in that some students assign traditional notions of sex role expectations to women faculty: inexhaustible availability and nurturance at the expense of the self, for example. Finally, I understand that I may not see changes in student's thinking or behavior that occurs after a course ends, that the process of learning and change is life long!

These commitments and conflicts represent one, and many feminists' perspectives on work as teacher and scholar. They also reflect feminist theory both within the discipline of communication studies and more broadly, within the interdisciplinary context of women's studies in general. They form a framework which validates and enhances the struggle to work within academe in the long run. The

commitments are guide, at times shortchanged or compromised. They conflicts are the tip of the iceberg! This essay then, may be a way to extend our thinking and conversations as feminist teachers and scholars -- to further explore, ask new questions of ourselves, and prompt the exchange of ideas yet to come.

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